

You have a plan, don't you?

Sunday, February 10, 2008 – Rev. Jim Cullen
 Genesis 2: 15-17 & 3: 1-7 and Matthew 4: 1-11

Last Tuesday was Pancake Day. I suppose some of you made your own; others found a church that was serving the traditional meal the day before Lent begins. The long-ago tradition was that families would use up the fat, eggs and dairy products before the “famine” during Lent. The real question is, “Is this the best we can do to prepare for Lent?”

From Wednesday on – we journey toward Easter – 40 days plus Sundays. The number 40 is significant in the Bible. Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness. The story of the flood speaks about 40 days of rain that destroyed the earth except for Noah, his family and animals. The Hebrew people spent 40 years in the wilderness. Moses fasted 40 days on the mountain before receiving the Law (10 Commandments.) Lent offers us a period of time to reflect on life, to enter our own “wilderness” and to focus on what gives meaning to our lives.

In today's gospel lesson we find Jesus in the wilderness preparing for his ministry. We associate wilderness with desolation, extreme heat, and the lack of resources. The original emphasis refers to a place that is uninhabited, a –place with no human population. Consequently, the emphasis is not so much on the look of the landscape as it is on the solitary nature of the experience. Jesus regularly went to these out of the way places during his ministry. He invites his followers to do the same. The wilderness is our place to figure out what to do and how we do it. A friend of mine used to say, “Plan the work and work the plan.”

The radio station we listen to most at home, 103.1 from Toronto and Cobourg frequently plays a commercial from Rainbow Landscaping. The conversation is about people fixing up their property – perhaps a fence, a stone, walkway, an elevated flower bed, an arbor. The commercial explains how the company can make it happen. It ends with “You have a plan, don't you?”

This is what the gospel lesson is about. It is Jesus time to work through his plan for ministry. Perhaps he sensed that God was saying, “You have a plan, don't you.” And God is saying also, “I have a plan for you.” The story begins with the statement; *Jesus ... was lead by the Spirit in the wilderness.* This gives the story a positive note. It helps us to deal with our own wilderness experiences. If our Lord was led by the Spirit in the wilderness it tells us that God was with him and is with us in our wilderness times. Perhaps it even suggests that God is already there, before we get there.

For forty days he was tempted by the devil. This verse may seem very remote to us. Yet, it does say to us that there are problems and challenges in life that cannot be solved quickly and easily. There are times when we have to wait and wait and wait some more. The forty days simply means a long time. We are people who crave instant responses. The remote for the TV allows us to make rapid changes to the programs that are offers to us. I often change the radio station in the car if I do not care for the song playing. This is not living in the wilderness. This is wanting what we want now. Rarely are significant things in our lives completed quickly.

Tempted by the devil, in our minds the language is open to interpretation. It does mean, however, that we have and will continue to confront the same demons that Jesus encountered – forces opposed to love, wholeness and peace.

If you are the Son of God. We may connect with Jesus at this level. He is wrestling with self-doubt. Who am I? Am I really the person I think I am? Can I be what I believe I should be? We have all heard these words of doubt whispered in our ears.

All three temptations are an appeal to Jesus' ego. They push him to think he can be self-sufficient – the demon says, you can do this. You can do it.

Command the stones to become bread. We are hearing the temptation to attract followers through bribery, by producing what they want or think they need. Our Lord refuses to turn stones to bread for himself, yet later in another place he feed a whole multitude.

The devil showed him ... all the kingdoms of the world. The temptation is to get people to follow him by the use of naked power. If you don't want to bribe them, then dominate them. Again, our Lord refuses, yet later he sends his followers to the ends of the earth.

Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple. The third option the demon offers is the possibility to impress people so much with spectacular events that they will follow. Jesus, again, refuses.

Notice the way Jesus refuses. Every option is an appeal to his human ego. Jesus defers to a higher power – a power higher than his own – God’s plan for his life and ministry. Each response is in reference to the presence of God’s Spirit and the Word from the scriptures.

Now all of this may have occurred in Jesus’ head. It was his way of sorting out his plan for the future while in that wilderness place.

Eventually he returns to the company of others, not to be a “one man show”, but to build community, to establish relationship with those who would come to follow him.

Luke ends the passage with a haunting but universal truth. ***When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*** The struggle was not over. There would be other times when Jesus had to withdraw and consider the future. Struggles and questions in life do reoccur.

On this first Sunday in Lent, let us think about our own wilderness experiences, past or present, the times we are isolated from what most influences us. We struggle for an answer. Who am I? What should I do? What does God expect from me in these circumstances? It can be lonely. It can be frightening. It can be healing and hopeful. Like Jesus, we have the resources – God’s presence and the guidance from the scriptures.

How can this Lenten Season impact our lives? Do we need a long walk, read a book, sit and watch a sunrise or sunset? Do we need to make some lists that will help us understand who we are –a list of people who have touched our lives, a list of times when we have been blessed, a list of what you think God would have you do in the next 40 days?

The First Sunday in Lent encourages us to get to know ourselves better, to understand what it means to be one of God’s children. It can be a time to let the fresh breeze of God’s Spirit blow through our lives.

I believe that we can bring together to aspects of the plan for our life. There is the plan that we discern, the plan we create bases on what we know about ourselves and how it relates to the gifts and opportunities that God has given us. And then there is the “master” plan that God offers to us, to be drawn into God’s plan for life that is rooted in a divine presence. As we bring these together we are blessed.

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